



HUMBOLDT COUNTY ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNMENTS
Regional Transportation Planning Agency
Humboldt County Local Transportation Authority
Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies
611 I Street, Suite B
Eureka, CA 95501
(707) 444-8208
www.hcaog.net

AGENDA ITEM 6a
SSTAC Meeting
October 4, 2023

DATE: September 26, 2023
TO: Social Services Transportation Advisory Council (SSTAC)
FROM: Stevie Luther, Associate Regional Planner
SUBJECT: **Unmet Transit Needs Reasonable to Meet Definitions**

STAFF REPORT

Contents:

- Staff's Recommended Action
- Staff Summary
- Unmet Transit Needs Definitions Markup
- Ventura County Reasonable to Meet Example

Staff's Recommended Action:

1. Introduce the item as an action item;
2. Allow staff to present the item;
3. Receive public comment;
4. Discuss item and consider making the motion:
"I move that the SSTAC direct staff to amend the Unmet Transit Needs definitions as discussed and that the SSTAC recommends the HCAOG Board adopt the TDA Rules and Guidelines as amended."

Staff Summary:

The Triennial Performance Audit recommended the SSTAC review the Unmet Transit Needs Reasonable to Meet criteria. One-way passenger-trips per vehicle service hour and operating cost (subsidy) per one-way passenger trip were the two recommended performance standards to use in evaluating new services. The SSTAC discussed these criteria at their August meeting and directed staff to return with additional information on how these criteria would be applied. SSTAC members were interested in better understanding how analyzing new services with these performance metrics could assist in finding which services would be viable.

Background:

The UTN criteria were last updated in the 2017 SSTAC Strategic Plan. Language was added specifying that subsidy per passenger trip and passengers per vehicle hour *may* be considered when evaluating competing services. The intent of this language was to provide direction to staff

and the SSTAC for how to quantitatively evaluate transit services to create a ranking in the event that multiple unmet needs were competing for limited funding. The report goes on to note the inherent equity issues that arise in needing to weigh quality-of-life benefits of services.

The Plan states:

“Weighing the various quantitative and qualitative factors is exactly the role of the SSTAC, and why the TDA identified the need for a SSTAC in each county. While the numbers can help guide the decision process, in the end the prioritization of transit improvements needs to reflect a community’s values... While the quantitative measures are an important evaluation tool and should provide the first approach in determining needs, qualitative factors, such as providing coverage to under-served or severely mobility-limited populations may be considered as well.”

Farebox and Performance Analysis:

The 2017 Strategic Plan identified the 10% farebox return threshold as a minimum for determining whether a need is reasonable to meet and suggested the additional performance standards be used as a tool to rank multiple transit needs. Historically, farebox return forecasts in Unmet Transit Needs reports have been higher than actual performance. For instance, the Tish Non Bear River Rancheria service was estimated to generate a 12% farebox. The original Tish Non service analysis calculated 7,560 passengers per year (30/day) with an operating cost at the time of \$191,880. The operating cost per passenger would therefore have been \$25.08 and the operating subsidy (less the \$3.00 fare) would be \$22.08. Operating over nine hours, the estimated passengers per hour would be 3.3. Two years later the Tish Non service performed at 4% farebox with just 1.5 passengers per vehicle hour and a \$53.15 operating cost per passenger. Further showing the challenge in growing ridership of new services, the Southern Humboldt Intercity took four years to reach a 10% farebox recovery ratio (2017 UTN Report).

In the analysis for the FY 23-24 Report of Findings, Redwood Transit System (RTS) Saturday night service between Arcata and Eureka and Sunday service were found to be needs that are reasonable to meet. Sunday service on RTS estimated 200 riders per day over a 31.48 hour operating period, equating to 6.3 riders per operating hour. The estimated subsidy per passenger trip would be \$18.89. Saturday late-night service on RTS would be an operating subsidy of \$16.60 per passenger with an estimated 7.2 passengers per vehicle service hour. With two needs identified and limited funding available, the performance standard analysis could be useful in its intended purpose as a ranking tool. In this case, the quantitative data suggests funding Saturday late-night before Sunday service. And in either case because the estimated ridership and resulting performance standards are an optimal scenario, the actual performance will likely be much lower for multiple years.

The Strategic Plan offers guidance on checking the correctness of ridership forecasting by noting that “the performance of a service expansion is almost always poorer than the existing service, reflecting that the existing service has been designed to serve the riders easiest to attract to the service.” This illustrates a problem with using performance criteria as a requirement for finding an unmet need “reasonable to meet.” Table 54 from the Draft Transit Development Plan copied below shows recommended performance standards. All transit services are currently performing under the recommended target for marginal operating subsidy per passenger. Logically, any expanded service will then also perform under the recommended standard. While the overall performance standards are averaged out across the whole system including the most productive times, the transit needs analysis evaluates services marginally, or in isolation from systemwide performance. A potential solution could be to require that a new transit service would not lower

the overall system performance by more than a certain percentage. However, this would be difficult to calculate in practice.

Staff recommends a small modification to the HCAOG Reasonable to Meet definition as written to make it clear that the report of findings will include an analysis of a UTN against performance standards to assist the SSTAC in decision making.

Number of Comments:

In past cycles, various petitions, surveys and targeted outreach have garnered significant numbers of requests for service. For instance, in 2017 the Peninsula Community Collaborative submitted a letter with seven signatures requesting service to Samoa. A petition sponsored by the Green Party was circulated requesting transit service until 11pm on weekdays and midnight on Friday and Saturday. The petition gathered 453 signatures. Also in 2017, a survey from College of the Redwoods students received 80 responses. The SSTAC Strategic Plan evaluated the results of these extensive public outreach efforts, concluding “The public sometimes overstates their need for services, possibly in hopes that service will be implemented, or possibly because they believe they will use a service that in fact they may not use.” The cautionary tale is that a large number of signatures or comments in favor of a new transit service does not equate to ridership.

That said, other jurisdictions do include standards for a minimum number of comments to be considered an unmet need (see Ventura example). Given Humboldt County’s population size and the number of comments received in recent years, which ranges from 15-25 individuals, a minimum number of comments might be at least two on the low end or at least five on the upper end. A minimum of two would have excluded from further evaluation the single request for service to Longvale, Mendocino in the FY 22-23 UTN Report. Requiring five comments would likely qualify the most requested service changes such as increased frequency or later service, while others such as service to Ferndale or weekend service to Blue Lake would likely be under the threshold and not be analyzed further as an unmet need.

The SSTAC is asked to deliberate on the suggested changes to the UTN Definitions and make a motion recommending staff to update the HCAOG TDA guidelines.

4. PROVIDE COST EFFICIENT SERVICES

Minimum Farebox Return Ratio

Transit Service	Recommended Standard ²	FY 2021-22 Performance ¹
RTS	10% Minimum	19.3%
ETS		19.5%
SHI		15.9%
WC		27.6%
Humboldt DAR		8.9%
A&MRTS		4.6%
Fortuna Transit		7.3%
BLRTS		N/A

Marginal Operating Subsidy per Passenger-Trip

Transit Service	Recommended Maximum Standard ³	FY 2021-22 Performance ¹
RTS	\$4.66	\$6.96
ETS	\$6.21	\$6.28
SHI	\$23.29	\$30.80
WC	\$15.53	\$18.97
Humboldt DAR	\$38.81	\$5.95
A&MRTS	\$3.88	\$19.52
Fortuna Transit	\$23.29	\$26.20
BLRTS	\$15.53	N/A